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## Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*: Damming the Columbia River and Traumatic Loss

*It is telling that the reporter who covered the occasion for The Dalles Chronicle likened [the drowning of Celilo] to the detonation of an atomic bomb*

—Katrine Barber, *Death of Celilo Falls*, 13.

Ken Kesey's classic 1962 novel raises, for many critics, questions of national and international significance. A good number of scholars very persuasively read the book allegorically: in certain formulations, the sexualized, swaggering individualist Randle P. McMurphy stands up against Nurse Ratched's attempt to shrink her patients down to impotent conformists. Fred Madden, refining that analysis, carefully demonstrates how McMurphy surrenders his personal agency to forces of nationalist-minded social control, despite his superficial rebelliousness. Marc Chénétier also reads the hospital as a symbol for America's repressive tendencies in the postwar period. Andrew Foley, in response, broadens Chief "Broom" Bromden's narration into an international context, arguing it offers readers the opportunity to examine the nature of liberty itself within broader forms of democratic governance.

Another significant vein in the criticism focuses on Kesey's representation of the traumatized self, particularly the psyche of an American Indian. Elaine Ware sees Bromden as suffering from an identity crisis owing to early twentieth-century usage of the "Vanishing American" trope. Wilson Kaiser's recent work draws persuasive

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connections between Bromden's madness and that of N. Scott Momaday's character Abel in *House Made of Dawn*. In doing so, Kaiser locates Kesey's story in a larger pattern of American Indian counterculture; *Cuckoo's Nest* might then be seen as presaging the Red Power and American Indian Movements. Kimberly R. Conner similarly draws from Momaday's *The Way to Rainy Mountain* in her reading of Bromden's "logic of storytelling" (235), though her approach to Bromden's narratorial strategy requires her readers to see him as "supremely sane" (246) rather than as a victim of psychological injury.<sup>1</sup>

To this point in time, however, few scholars situate the book within its regional context. Ashley E. Reis deserves credit for perhaps being the first whose published work highlights specific details about how *Cuckoo's Nest* emphasizes its local and Native-focused interests.<sup>2</sup> While she correctly highlights the general damage done to Bromden's interiority as a consequence of US environmental policy rather than his war experiences, the distinctive characteristics of American Indian selfhood require particular attention as-yet unacknowledged in Kesey scholarship. Additionally, Reis only identifies the drowning of Celilo Falls as contributing to Bromden's illness, failing to capture the whole extent to which the Pacific Northwest's largest river was reengineered. The Columbia River, a victim of so much human meddling, has become both the western US's stented artery and an artifact of federal impositions on Western localities: the 60-plus dams punctuating its watershed provide the irrigation and electrical systems for the inland Northwest that supported the development of industries from viticulture to nuclear innovation. Finally, Kesey's distinctive formal approach to representing that past offers inroads to honoring regionally-specific indigenous concerns—his approach to historiographic metafiction demands careful parsing in its Northwest context. Studying the novel in its historical context further reveals a conflict between Native spiritualities and a thinly veiled but oft-ignored Christian project of "civilizing" the West.

The Columbia's significance to the states of Oregon and Washington generally makes some knowledge of the river's history helpful in better understanding *Cuckoo's Nest*. In particular, its readers will profit by recognizing 1957 saw the completion of The Dalles Dam, transforming an approximately ten-mile run of rapids and falls into the present-day Lake Celilo east of The Dalles, OR. Reis rightly points out that Kesey's "characters experience the degradation of their home-place" and "suffer significant psychological harm" (712). Thus *Cuckoo's Nest* "illustrates . . . the complex ways that harm inflicted on environments come to bear on human bodies and minds" (712). For the American Indian residents of the Columbia Plateau, March 10,

1957 is a date that will live in infamy (to borrow a phrase from Franklin D. Roosevelt) as that on which Celilo Falls was drowned, replaying the horror that happened to Kettle Falls with the installation of the Grand Coulee Dam, as well as the destruction of many other vitally important sites for the collection of salmon. Cain Allen avers “The Dalles-Celilo reach was possibly the most productive inland fishery in Native North America” (547). With The Dalles Dam’s activation, a center of spiritual, cultural, and economic exchange vital to the lives of Plateau Peoples was shuttered by the United States’ federal government’s ideas about how best to grow the nation.

With this knowledge in mind, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* reads as Kesey’s documenting the imagined effects on the mind of one Columbia River-based Indian. Bromden’s traumatic experience offers, via synecdoche, Kesey’s representation of the damage wrought by US environmental (mis)management on the many indigenous persons dependent on the Columbia for their spiritual and economic strength. Thus, this ostensibly national novel indexes a six-decade-long pattern of traumatic losses on the Inland Plateau while meditating on how mid-century notions of “progress” manifested both in psychological as well as environmental strategies of containment. *Cuckoo’s Nest* thereby also problematizes US-centric ideas of the local and the national; in sum, Kesey’s sophisticated poetics makes his novel a signal contribution to America’s environmentally focused literatures.

### Chief “Broom” Bromden’s Hallucinations

A child of a “full blood Columbia Indian” (16) and a white woman from The Dalles (186), “Chief Broom” Bromden begins the novel so beset by schizophrenia that he refuses to speak and pretends to be deaf. Ware documents how American racism contributes to Bromden’s psychosis, but her essay insists, on no evidence, that he is a Chinook Indian—a substantial error of confidence in identification. Native people called the Celilo area “Wyam,” a Sahaptin word meaning “echo of falling water.”<sup>3</sup> More, if Bromden’s family members serve jail time in The Dalles for violating a corpse, and his father marries a white woman from The Dalles, then his village would probably lie in the groups we now call Warm Springs, Yakama, or other inland Indian peoples’ territory; the Chinook are a costal people who live roughly two hundred miles west of The Dalles. Were the Bromdens Chinookan-speaking, they might be Wasco. Growing up in Springfield, OR, Kesey would have driven past mostly Sahaptin-speaking peoples’ territory on his frequent trips to the Pendleton Roundup in Northeast Oregon. For

these reasons, we cannot positively identify the Chief's specific tribal ancestry.

At the novel's outset, Bromden has been confined in a mental hospital for decades. Plagued by hallucinations, his perceptions of unreality are largely classifiable into two main types. The source of one kind—a buffering fog—results from his experience at an airfield in World War Two: "I know how they work it, the fog machine. We had a whole platoon used to operate the fog machines around airfields overseas" (116). Though an annoyance, the fog phenomenon presents as vastly less threatening than his paranoid delusions about the ward, which he feels is a node in the system of national repression called "the 'Combine,' which is a huge organization that aims to adjust the Outside [world] as well as [Nurse Ratched] has the Inside" (30).<sup>4</sup> Bromden further explains, "The ward is a factory for the Combine. It's for fixing up mistakes made in the neighborhoods and in the schools and in the churches, the hospital is" (40). The dimensions of the Combine appear near limitless: the ward vibrates with its activity to varying degrees of intensity; Bromden imagines that Nurse Ratched and her minions do their most damaging work at its heartless core.

Closely tracking the words Bromden uses to describe the Combine provides a key into the language of traumatic loss, what Reis rightly calls an "environmental illness," as antecedent to what one might now call war-induced post-traumatic stress disorder. Two particular elements—electricity and water—signal the importance of Celilo and Kettle Falls' drowning (among others) and, concomitantly, a substantially damaged way of life. One might assign the genesis of the Chief's obsession with electricity with his experience with a radar unit in the war as well as to his repeated electroshock doses, the latter of which issues directly from the system of dams that destroyed his childhood home. The tub room's "control panel," an enormous outdated hydrotherapy machine which ultimately gives Bromden the means by which to escape both his illness and his enforced confinement to the mental hospital, unites water with electricity as mechanisms of control and causes of his insanity.

Describing the ward's characteristic "hum," Kesey begins his subtle but consistent prodding toward thinking about the drowning of sites including Celilo and Kettle Falls as a critical cause of Bromden's psychotic episodes. Early in the novel, the persistent sound reminds him of a trip he took to a cotton mill as a member of his high school football team. He recounts lingering inside long after most of his teammates had returned to their bus:

The mill put me in a kind of dream, all the humming and clicking and rattling of people and machinery, jerking around in a pattern. That's why I stayed when the others left, that, and because it reminded me somehow of the men in the tribe who'd left the village in the last days to do work on the gravel crusher for the dam. The frenzied pattern, the faces hypnotized by routine . . . I wanted to go out in the bus with the team, but I couldn't. (39)<sup>5</sup>

Bromden equates the labor of "Negro girls running up and down the aisles of the machines" (38) as both mandatory and mad; he perceives the workers' irrational alienation and its association with Fordist rectilinear time. According to Mark C. Taylor, early twentieth-century production-design ideals regarding efficiency conjoined with the emergent logic of an increasingly omnipresent gridded order to America: "Ford and his engineers realized that efficient production required the imposition of mechanical regularity on natural rhythms," which led to an effort to "regulate time by reconfiguring space" (29). Yet this also feeds "one of the inescapable contradictions of capitalism. Profitable production requires, on the one hand, the rational control of emotions and desire and, on the other, the cultivation of the desire to consume, which is often unreasonable" (29). Furthermore, Taylor points out how early- to mid-century impulses to reconfigure organically derived pathways through landscapes recapitulated Barron Haussman-like efforts to raze and reconfigure curved space with an idealized orthogonal order. Bromden also observes how laborers' immediate material needs can be marshaled against their longer-term self-interest, as made clear by the Native persons who worked on the very apparatus that would lead to their community's destruction.

In a later scene of "hypnotism," Bromden hallucinates a descent into the inner workings of the ward. It begins with "a dull, padded rumbling somewhere deep in the guts of the building, [. . .] a lot like the sound when you're standing late at night on top of a big hydroelectric dam" (78). His descent finally complete, Bromden details, "it—everything I see, looks like it sounded, like the inside of a tremendous dam." Supposedly watching the ward's operators, he contends, "I hear the slap of wet sides like the slap of a salmon's tail on water" (79), beginning to recall his childhood experiences at sites like Celilo and Kettle Falls, where Plateau Peoples had annually hauled in a year's worth of fish to sustain their physical and spiritual selves for over ten thousand years.

As Bromden and McMurphy develop their rapport, and as the American Indian man regains a sense of his physical enormity, further

details about Bromden's background play a greater role in explaining the origins of his conditions. In many instances, these revelations link concretely to his life prior to the damming of the Columbia. "The pool always scared me; I was always afraid I'd step in over my head and drown," despite his impressive six-foot-eight-inch stature (147). "I used to be real brave when I was a kid on the Columbia; I'd walk the scaffolding around the falls with all the other men, scrambling with water roaring green and white all around me [. . .]. But when I saw my papa start getting scared of things, I got scared, too" (147). How Bromden builds connections with the color green and water with the ideas of "wellness" and "nature" ultimately offers insights into his path to recovery. How he completes that resolution involves who Bromden was as a child and where he wants to go when he flees the institution.

Connecting *Cuckoo's Nest* with the disappearance of Celilo Falls and the surrounding river raises a certain problem of temporality, of course: by 1960, The Dalles dam was only active for three years. Bromden's adolescence clearly occurred in a much earlier era—as Ware points out, probably in the 1920s or 1930s. Hence the book should be read as an example of historiographic metafiction: that is to say, Kesey layers several other catastrophic events, such as the drowning of Cascade Rapids in the 1930s, the erection of the Grand Coulee dam and the subsequent drowning of Colville peoples' lands by Franklin Delano Roosevelt Lake in the 1940s, and the destruction of Priest Rapids in 1959 into a single event.<sup>6</sup> He imagines their effects on the psyche of a single man, affording his readers a kind of specific empathy with Bromden's loss that represents well the effects of environmental degradation and land-loss on countless American Indian people. By adopting regionally-specific perspective, Kesey avoids potentially essentializing Bromden's story as speaking to all American Indian experiences.

### "My People Will Never Be The Same"

Roughly the same size as France, the Columbia Plateau extends west from the Bitterroots to the Cascade mountain ranges, and north from the Blue Mountains well into modern-day British Columbia. Although Celilo Falls annually drew members of Indian nations from an enormous range in every direction surrounding it, its closest indigenous inhabitants "could rightly be called Wy-Kan-Ush-Pum" in Sahaptin; that is, "Salmon People" (Columbia River Intertribal n.p.). Though pre-Contact politics require much further explanation than is possible or appropriate for this venue, the region currently supports scores of tribes and bands, federally recognized and otherwise, in both



the USA and Canada.<sup>7</sup> Celilo-area Native Americans explain the sacrality of Salmon according to his willingness to keep human people alive: as regional tales frequently relate, humankind was the weakest creation of all the Creator's efforts. Seeing them struggle pitifully, Salmon came forward and offered himself to the region's human persons as a source of sustenance, on the condition that humans honor his habitat by caring for it.<sup>8</sup> Following his lead, other game animals stepped up and offered themselves on similar terms. For this reason, Plateau Peoples' religious ceremonies typically open with blessings of water and salmon.

This firstness in ceremonial sequence mirrors the firstness of water and salmon in Sahaptian and Interior-Salishan speaking peoples' epistemologies. To drown out a falls, then, enacts a desecration of ineffable proportions. A fishery of such caliber as Celilo serves as a hub of ceremony and commerce, of exuberance and exchange, and of entire peoples' joy and humankind's humility. Lamenting the lack of specific attention paid to Bromden's recovery from electroshock treatments, Madden quotes Bromden, recalling: "My roll. Faw. Damn. Twisted again. Snake eyes." Madden continues on to cite a number of moments tied to Bromden's growing sense of Indianness in American culture, and his rejection of the US's reductive options for Native people (212). The first activity Bromden mentions, however, focuses on his rolling dice; sites like Celilo would have featured much gaming, dancing, drumming, singing, and other forms of entertainment after the work of fishing was concluded for the day.

Salmon runs also provide a key anchor for time-keeping, as procuring fish comprises a central component of the "seasonal round," or the series of annual events dictating which foods get harvested what particular times, thus which also has the effect of inaugurating certain celebrations, habitation patterns, and other life-defining components of Plateau Peoples' lives. Fishing runs cannot be rebuilt—though one can be restored. In testimony before the US Congress, then-Chairman of the Nez Perce Tribal Executive Committee explained, "For generations, our ancestors were the caretakers of the Pacific Northwest's salmon runs and treated them as a part of the world that our creator had entrusted to us." Furthermore,

From the Nez Perce Tribe's point of view, reversing the decline of the Columbia Basin salmon is more than just a matter of professional interest, or a legal obligation, or a cost of doing business. The salmon are an integral part of our way of life. We recognize that we have more to lose than anyone if the salmon runs continue to decline. (Penney, qtd. in Landeen and Pinkham 4)

Such losses cannot be wholly calculated in dollars and cents, neither in political power nor influence. They must also be reckoned in spiritual terms, as a failure to uphold an ancient and ongoing mandate to care for a sacred trust.

Along with destroying a key habitat for salmon, dams destroy key habitats for human persons. By the 1960s, Indians of the Columbia Plateau had lost many lives and so much of their land base. This, too, is a story too long to tell well here, but broad strokes may help. At first, the Native peoples living in the Columbia watershed largely welcomed the small number of white fur traders who set up posts up and down the river during the early nineteenth century. By 1855, many (but not all) tribes and bands agreed treaties with the US government to forestall military and paramilitary aggression by white settler-colonists. The discovery of gold, misguided do-gooderism in the form of the Dawes Act, and the bungled policy that was Termination all contributed to massive decreases in American Indian land bases in the Columbia region.<sup>9</sup>

Adding injury to injury, the drowning of Celilo precipitated further displacement of indigenous populations in the region. As The Dalles Dam swallowed Celilo Falls whole, Andrew Fisher explains, "the rising waters also flooded some of the oldest continuously inhabited settlements in North America" (193). Katrine Barber points out how Celilo Village still "survives to this day as Oregon's oldest continually inhabited town" (12), despite suffering damage consequent the Columbia's unnaturally swollen banks. Among the estimated 10,000 witnesses (Barber 4) who gathered to watch the calamity were "a group of Indian women [who] wailed in mourning"; upon hearing of its disappearance, Columbia River Indian leader Tommy Thompson lamented "there goes my life" and stated plainly: "my people will never be the same" (Fisher 192). While US national discourse designates such as "property," land-ownership in Plateau Peoples' cultures means something fundamentally different to US law.

US citizens own land in a certain way: but for adherents to *tamánwit*, or the natural law of many indigenous Plateau Peoples, human people belong to the land. Umatilla Tribal Interpreter Thomas Morning Owl outlines how

the *tamánwit* of the past included the concept of divine ordination and creation. In the stories of our people, *tamánwit* is an ideology by which all things of the earth were placed by the Creator for a purpose. The works of the Creator were given behaviors that were unchangeable, and until time's end, these laws are to be kept. This



understanding of *tamánwit* allows for the explanation of how things are placed on the earth. (3)

When US agents stole lands from Columbia Plateau Peoples, they stole a large measure of their capacity to fulfill their obligations to each other as well as to their supreme being. For Bromden, this loss took the form of his father's all-consuming alcoholism and the dissolution of his ancestral community. "Lying there in bed," Bromden narrates, "I tried to think back" to when he first noticed the power of his surrendering his voice so as to act deaf. "I think it was once when we were still living in the village on the Columbia. It was summer . . ." at which point the paragraph ends, and another resumes: " . . . and I'm about ten years old and I'm out in front of the shack sprinkling salt on the salmon" (178). Perhaps to underscore his point, Kesey uses repetitive punctuation and a paragraph shift, calling attention to the Chief's change in tense.

Moving from past- to present-tense signals a trigger: psychologists recognize how victims of trauma often lose control of the recall process owing to the continual harm remembering painful events can enact on the injured subject. Reading trauma in literature rose to a place of particular prominence in literary scholarship of the past two decades, as Michelle Balaev documents. She explains that most critics interested in the problem focus on how dissociation breaks down the subject's ability to represent the traumatic event in language, as well as a fragmentation of the self. In contrast to what she calls the "traditional model" (3), however, Balaev complicates predominant theories espoused by thinkers such as Kathy Caruth and Kali Tal by emphasizing the unclear relationships between troublingly nebulous ideas of what constitutes "trauma" in Euro-American science and, concomitantly, what are definitively causal symptoms of the fuzzy set of things that may be said to cause trauma. Nevertheless, she maintains that trauma does plague many persons and also features prominently in literary attempts to make sense of an injurious past, whether directly experienced or inherited.

In working through his lost spaces for community interaction, spiritual obligation, and economic independence (among other tragedies inflicted by the drowning of salmon runs), Kesey's narrator Bromden exhibits symptoms generally associated with the "traditional model" of trauma, but which would be consistent with post-Freudian symptomologies regnant in the early 1960s when the novel was written.<sup>10</sup> Problems arising from the dissociation caused by Bromden's loss of family and land would include "imagistic scenes of violence that lack emotional description" (Balaev xvi), not unlike the novel's opening scenes of implausible acts of violence rendered with relatively flat

affect. In addition, shifting from past to present tense in representing his childhood experiences evidences both the “atemporality” (xvi) and “intrusive recall” (Balaev 15) consistent with the mid-century approaches to processing and treating traumatic loss.

Also consistent with trauma treatment practices of the time, McMurphy aids in Bromden's beginning to recover by getting the Indian man to talk through his past. Describing how the Combine slowly destroyed his father, Bromden explained to McMurphy that the government “wanted to make [his father] see what [terrors] he had in store for him only worse if he didn't sign the papers giving everything to the government” (187). When McMurphy asks what Bromden's father signed away, he replies, “everything. The tribe, the village, the falls” (187). At this point, McMurphy recalls what seems to be peripheral experiences from his own past: “now I remember; you're talking about the falls where the Indians used to spear salmon—long time ago. Yeah. But the way I remember it the tribe got paid some huge amount” (187). Understanding history from a white man's perspective, McMurphy fails to comprehend what Bromden finally articulates:

That's what they said to him. [My father] said, What can you pay for the way a man lives? He said, What can you pay for what a man is? They didn't understand. Not even the tribe. They stood out in front of our door all holding those checks and they wanted him to tell them what to do now. They kept asking him to invest for them, or to tell them where to go, or to buy a farm. But he was too little anymore. (187)

Barber identifies McMurphy's type of misunderstanding as “one of the myths of the Pacific Northwest . . . that the federal government fairly compensated Indian people for the inundation of fishing sites along the Columbia” (181). Just as with his father, the Combine whittled Bromden down to a near paralytic diminishment. Kesey's punctuation—or the lack thereof, in this case—also underscores a reality about American Indian self-identity that frequently resists comprehension in white American thinking. In failing to offset Bromden's father's voice from that of Bromden himself with quotation marks, the novel highlights both Plateau notions of selfhood and of traditional government.<sup>11</sup>

With respect to indigenous selfhood, Arnold Krupat identifies in American Indian autobiography (the genre Kesey's novel appropriates) differing assumptions about the human personhood from presumed “givens” in European writing:

metonymy is concerned with part-part relations while synecdoche is concerned with part-whole relations. Here I want to propose that while modern Western autobiography has been essentially metonymic in orientation, Native American autobiography has been and continues to be persistently synecdochic, and that the preference for synecdochic models of the self has relations to the oral techniques of information transmission typical of Native American cultures. (216)

Intentionally or not, Kesey's approximation of a Native person's speaking represents the trans- and intra-generational tendency often observed in how Native persons write about their lives; put otherwise, for many American Indians, to speak for the self is to speak for many, as Bromden does, just as his father did.

With respect to government, the breakdown in the US's and McMurphy's understanding issues from the fundamental divergence in how leadership functions. America's federal government comprises a coercive state: the novel's ward offers a concrete and specific example of such power. When persons fail to act within the confines of law and normalized behavior, elected officials or their appointees and employees can coerce subjects either into conformity or captivity. Not so with Plateau Peoples' administration. Prior to Contact, Plateau entities were consensus states: that is to say, when people failed to act within the confines of law or custom, they might be expelled from the community. Concomitantly, if people found a leader's judgment, courage, or charisma lacking, they might leave one community to live with another group whose chiefs demonstrated superior qualities.<sup>12</sup>

Juxtaposing coercive with consensus governance, the novel raises questions about how to comprehend what comprises a locality versus a nation. For the indigenous peoples of the inland Northwest, or what dominant US epistemologies would define as a locality or a region, the Columbia Plateau is the National. Bromden witnessed the transformation of a whole nation into only a small part of a larger one. He also lived the experience of shifting from a synecdochic to a metonymic dominant concept of human personhood. Hence I disagree with Ware that Bromden does or should aspire to self-reliance (101), an alien, post-Emersonian American individualist ideal that led to Bromden's fragmented sense of selfhood in the first place.<sup>13</sup> Further, scholars such as Reis would benefit from thinking about specifically indigenous ideas of interiority. Forced to watch his spirituality and community dissolve, trapped into witnessing his father's transformation from an inimitable leader to a powerless addict, and condemned to live under

foreign laws and epistemologies of the self, the novel leaves little wonder as to the cause of Bromden's mental illness: the wholesale reshaping of the Columbia River. Yet it also details his path to recovery, subtly but clearly marked by McMurphy's makeshift talk-therapy and an immersive experience on a life-changing fishing trip.

Recalling the life-affirming qualities of salmon fishing, Bromden overcomes his fear of water and joins a group of patients, prostitutes, and a doctor on a chartered ship. To help Bromden afford his share of the excursion, McMurphy reminds Bromden just how large and strong he actually is; in tandem, the two men use Bromden's rediscovered physical prowess to win a bet against other men in the ward. Aboard the fishing vessel, and after landing one "bigger'n any fish we got at the falls" (211), the healthy child becomes father to the healing man, as Bromden remarks how "a wind came up and broke the sea up into green and silver chunks, like a field of glass and chrome" (213). Whereas to this point, the water is described as chrome (a color of technology and often associated with superficial elements on automobiles), he now sees a balance of green and metal, of nature and technology—a balance that might be seen as replacing him back under the rule of *tamánwít* as much as US authority.<sup>14</sup>

### Crookeding out the Squares

Recall that Bromden understands the ward as an instrument for the Combine; the mental hospital serves the purpose of straightening out crooked minds, for gridding what, by its nature, runs an inefficient and unpredictable course. Somewhat sardonically describing "when a completed product goes back out into society, all fixed up good as new, *better* than new sometimes," Bromden diagnoses a quality in US anti-organic approach to land development that Taylor identifies almost four decades later. "Something that came in all twisted is not a functioning, adjusted component, a credit to the whole outfit and a marvel to behold. Watch him sliding across the land with a welded grin, fitting into some nice little neighborhood where they're just now digging trenches along the street to lay pipes for city water" (Kesey 40). Taylor points out that early twentieth-century capitalists saw newness—in Bromden's example, it would follow, birth or childhood—as flawed. In Fordist America, childish thought, like the unplanned city or "primitive" art, was regarded as outmoded, inefficient, illogical, and certainly irrational (Taylor 26–27).<sup>15</sup> The adult employee, consumer, and citizen should be that mythical beast, *homo economicus*: taking the shortest path to cross a distance, squaring what is thoughtlessly rounded. The land should support that kind of travel.

The Dalles-Celilo Reach was anything but orthogonal. It was equal parts whitewater rapids and waterfall. It impeded travel for human persons and salmon alike; as travel impediment, however, it forced the salmon to leap, often into Native fishermen's nets.<sup>16</sup> But the US government failed to appreciate the degree to which Celilo served Plateau Peoples' minds, bodies, and souls. By building dams like The Dalles, it turned a roaring river into a series of languid lakes, taking energy from Salmon and his people and diverting it to farms, cities, and suburbs in Washington and Oregon. Bromden explains this, recognizing how the new neighborhoods only existed atop the infrastructure of running water: water made possible only by the US government's dam-and-contain strategy. These communities came to embody what Taylor sees as the worst of modernist architecture and planning: "Far from developing an architecture that is 'the expression of the inner structure of our time,' classically modern architecture actually represents devotion to puritanical moralism that is 'dissatisfied with *existing* conditions'" (35). Again, Kesey intuitively what Taylor later articulates: the US midcentury identified progress as a process whereby organic irregularity got straightened out by design and planning implementation. The ward's Fordist division of space and time reflect the changes to the river environment north of the hospital. Wellness defined by this rationality, Kesey implies, makes everyone crazy; for this reason, I contend, nearly as many patients opt into as are coerced into the hospital's treatment program.

Notably, the rhetoric of Christian progress punctuates the evolution of Celilo Falls into its modern, near-stilled and rectilinear state. In 1915, a completed canal circumvented the falls' rough waterways, prompting prominent civic leader Joseph Nathan Teal to exclaim, "this mighty work symbolizes the stern, unfaltering determination of the people that our water shall be free, free to serve the uses and the purposes of a divine providence" (qtd. in Cone, n.p.). Presidential candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt made damming the Columbia for the purposes of electrifying the West a central platform in his first electoral campaign and made good on that promise, funding the Bonneville Power Administration, which exists to this day, very early in his presidency. In 1948, then-President Harry S. Truman proclaimed, "I want to see the river developed for the benefit of the people" (qtd. in Cone, n.p.) leaving his definition of "the people" clearly privileging white farmers and manufacturers over American Indian populations. Dwight D. Eisenhower saw the river in the same terms as his Democratic predecessors: a resource for the developing "inland empire" also known as the Columbia Plateau. "It is essential," he proclaimed, "that every drop of water, from the moment that it falls upon our land, be turned to the

service of our people. Thus we will save our soil, and make it more productive." Salvation, productivity, and (again) "our people" make what Taylor rightly calls the "puritanical moralism" such convincing arguments for flattening and straightening the natural state of the Columbia. So, too, Kesey sees such arguments for flattening and straightening out human thought, an imposition of a single-mindedness that does not accommodate such epistemologies as Bromden's peoples' lifeways. For the State, Indians are not recognizable people, the novel suggests: at least not the "people" invoked by Teal and Truman.

McMurphy's libidinous resistance to Nurse Ratched's Fordist Order requires proportionately aggressive tactics to that of damming a river. The doctors restrain his energy (sexist and criminal though it may be), lobotomizing and thereby imposing exterior notions of ideality on his interior state. Thus one might argue Bromden did not kill McMurphy so much as he killed a symbol of the Combine's triumph; the murder becomes a political act of revenge on the system that destroyed his village before he escapes and flees. He then turns his attention to the idea of becoming well again. "I might go to Canada eventually," he speculates in the novel's penultimate paragraph,

but I think I'll stop along the Columbia on the way. I'd like to check around Portland and Hood River and The Dalles to see if there's any of the guys I used to know back in the village who haven't drunk themselves goofy. I'd like to see what they've been doing since the government tried to buy their right to be Indians. I've even heard that some of the tribe have took to building their old ramshackle wood scaffolding all over that big million-dollar hydroelectric dam, and are spearing salmon in the spillway. (272)

Far from the "growing individualism" Madden identifies as the source of Bromden's recovery, the novel posits the act of community restoration, of reestablishing his synecdochic interiority, as the shortest path to self-restoration. To rebuild his village's interpersonal bonds, Bromden believes, will serve the aim of rebuilding his sanity; though he cannot tear down the dams, he can work with his people to reshape elements of it to the Plateau Peoples' traditional methods of maintaining and sustaining themselves and their land. Eventually, as dam removal at the Elwah River and sites of Indian education such as Tamástlikt Cultural Institute on the Umatilla reservation demonstrate, Bromden's best hopes might come to fruition and the squared West might be made most healthfully crooked again.



## NOTES

1. Although Conner's reading deserves congratulations for being among the first articles to appreciate the novel's thoroughgoing American Indian influences, it errs by identifying Bromden as a Chinook man. Moreover, she reads Kesey's narrator as articulating a poetics appropriate to Momaday's specifically Kiowa thought *avant la lettre*, which strikes me as insensitive to Momaday's innovative genius at worst and as an inadequately substantiated retrodiction onto Kesey's novel at best.

2. Unfortunately, Reis also misidentifies Bromden as a Chinook Indian (719) despite previously claiming that Bromden grew up at Celilo Village, an unincorporated community which is mostly populated by Yakama and Warm Springs people. She also mistakenly places The Dalles-Celilo reach "just west of the Dalles" (716) and oversimplifies "the need for hydropower during the war" (719) spurring The Dalles Dam's construction, which began in 1952. In point of fact, the transformation of that section of the Columbia began as early as 1915, to facilitate travel. The ongoing existence of Columbia dams are also often justified as important tools in flood control as well as offering recreational opportunities for swimmers and boaters. Arguments for the dam's need changed over time: the intent to transfer the region and its wealth from Indian people to white Americans did remain a consistent thread. See Barber, *passim*.

3. Scholars interested in the Columbia Plateau should acknowledge the oft-confused distinction between "Sahaptin," which refers to "the language," and "Sahaptian (the family of languages," which includes the Sahaptin and Nez Perce languages (Hunn and Rigsby 17).

4. Here again, I take issue with Reis's reading of the novel. She conflates Bromden's fog hallucinations with his paranoid fantasies about "The Combine" (716). I contend these symptoms manifest in differing ways and, therefore, issue from different psychic injuries.

5. Because ellipses are an important feature of Kesey's prose style, I indicate my elisions in brackets and leave Kesey's as they are used.

6. Linda Hutcheon defines "historiographic metafiction" in her *Poetics of Postmodernism*; see especially Chapter Seven. As an artifact that call attention to itself as fictive as well as gesturing to the writing of history, Kesey's metafictional moves include Bromden's repeatedly affirming his memory's clarity (26, 27) and such details as McMurphy explaining his "Literary major" girlfriend giving white-whale underwear to him "because she said I was a symbol" (76).

7. For a thorough, if somewhat speculative treatment of Plateau Peoples politics prior to the arrival of white settler-colonists, see Elliott West's *The Last Indian War: the Nez Perce Story*, especially 3–35. Ironically—and coincidentally, as he informed me in person—West describes the Plateau's pre-Contact political configuration as a "combine." In this case, however, he describes a rhizomatic network of exchange and intermarriage that led to robust health on the Plateau, not the imbalances incited by conformity in Bromden's vision.

8. I use the term “human person” as opposed to mere “human” to recognize that for Plateau Peoples, the concept of “personhood” extends beyond the range of human beings to include animals, medicines, and other subjectivities typically excluded in Euro-American epistemologies.

9. Laurie Arnold's *Bartering with the Bones of Their Dead* offers a riveting narrative of Termination as it affected the Colville Reservation, which was also substantively harmed by the Grand Coulee.

10. Balaev demonstrates significant problems with relying solely on the “traditional model” of understanding trauma because, she argues, doing so overemphasizes certain scientific claims about the causes of and effects on the traumatized subject without accounting for other, equally viable psychological approaches to the condition. She advocates a pluralistic approach by introducing alternatives to predominant trends in the criticism, not limited to (but emphasizing) where and how “place” functions in trauma narratives. “Place,” she contends, “is . . . a central aspect of traumatic experience in literary representations because place provides a conceptual framework in which emotional responses occur” (xv). In Bromden's case, with the loss of his homeland, he loses key features of the conceptual framework itself.

11. Balaev further criticizes contemporary trauma scholarship for both essentializing (or perhaps reifying) selfhood as well as conflating absence with loss. Bromden experiences his loss immediately and therefore should not be misread as “absence”; additionally, as I argue below, his synecdochic conception of selfhood reflects American Indian ideals and thus both Kesey and I avoid the tendency to work within reductive paradigms of understanding the subject of trauma.

12. Theodore Stern describes the operations of power and leadership among Plateau Peoples during the initial stages of colonization in his outstanding, two-volume study of Fort Nez Percés.

13. Emerson's thoroughgoing—if often unrecognized—Protestant presumptions are outlined in my essay “The Eye-Ball and the Butterfly.”

14. This discourse of *tamánwit* marks a critical distinction between recognizing the evolving lifeways of vibrant, growing peoples and merely reaffirming the hackneyed “environmental Indian” stereotype. As far as I have seen, heard, or read, nothing in *tamánwit* resists the deployment of contemporary technology in service of fulfilling the law. That said, indigenous land-management strategies have proved profoundly more sustainable than Euro-American row agricultural practices, which have led to the near persistent state of drought in many parts of the West for the past few years, as well as unprecedented wildfires.

15. Not surprisingly, avant garde artists rejected such thinking in painting, sculpture, and writing; Pablo Picasso, Paul Klee, Albert Giacometti, and Gertrude Stein all come immediately to mind.

16. Gendered pronouns are appropriate here. Traditionally, Plateau men fish while women prepare and preserve the catch. Though labor remains divided, it remains equitable. Patriarchal societies frequently err when projecting criticisms of one political system's flaws onto another.

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